

# THE VOLUNTEER CHALLENGE, THEN AND NOW 1993-2004

by  
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*The past is never dead. It's not even past.—William Faulkner*

Never let it be said that we are the people and wisdom will die with us. Job of the Bible charged his tormentors with such a frame of mind, with thinking that they had all the answers while Job was suffering because of his sins. Whatever good we do in our own lifetimes has to be based, not on our own wisdom, but on the accumulated wisdom of our predecessors, our ancestors, whom we come to know through the records they left for us. Without those records, without a knowledge of history itself, we are, as Santayana warned, doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

This statewide assessment of historical records, the successor to the first *Volunteer Challenge*, which was published in 1993, recognizes our debt to the past in at least two ways:

1. By reporting on the state of records preservation in Tennessee. It is in the interest of all Tennesseans, rural and urban, to preserve historical records, and we believe that preservation of public records is a right and proper responsibility of government at all levels.
2. By recognizing the initiatives of those who have worked to preserve public records in years past. In this brief overview, I will focus on the latter.

Records preservation has not always been an easy task. St. George Leakin Sioussat, in his *Report on the Archives of Tennessee* written at the beginning of the twentieth century, noted: "Very many circumstances have conspired to prevent the preservation of anything like a complete body of archives in the State of Tennessee. . .Men were busy preserving their lives and their civilization, not their records." It can also be said that men (and women) of our time have been busy in many other areas, giving attention to other matters but scant attention to records preservation. In general, records preservation is rarely high on the agenda of local government and not as high as we would like in state government.

But we should not forget those who have taken it upon themselves to assure proper preservation of historical records. I will begin by remembering the late John H. Thweatt, who served as a highly professional archivist over many years and who gave both name and substance to *The Volunteer Challenge*. John died in 1998, but his dedication lives on in the work of others.

I also thank Dr. Wayne C. Moore and his associates, Jami Awalt and Gwynn Thayer, for the present report and the work that it represents. The content of this report speaks for itself, but suffice it to say that it is the result of many hours of study and concentration, of many miles of travel within Tennessee, of many conversations with local officials and archivists. In this *Volunteer Challenge 2004: A Report on Archives and Record Keeping in Tennessee*, Dr. Moore and associates provide an in-depth update on the issues reported in the previous *Volunteer Challenge* and look ahead to the next decade.

I also wish to thank the members of the Tennessee Historical Records Advisory Board for lending their professional expertise to this project. It is, in a sense, their report, the result of years of meetings and contemplation of the challenges facing historical records preservation across the state of Tennessee.

None of the activities would have taken place were it not for the continuing support of Secretary of State Riley C. Darnell, whose responsibilities in a broad range of areas of state government have not diminished his determination to provide increased support for this state's libraries and archives, through the Tennessee State Library and Archives, its regional library system, and archival activities statewide.

*The Volunteer Challenge* of 1993 focused on four kinds of records and programs: (1) state government records, (2) local government records, (3) historical records repositories, and (4) statewide functions and services. Each section on the findings in these areas concluded with two types of recommendations: (1) short-term goals to be accomplished in the next two years and (2) long-term goals to be accomplished in the next five years. The total number of goals, not counting subheadings, came to 29 and 14 respectively. No knowledgeable person could read those recommendations today without appreciating the progress that has been made in this area over the past decade. Nor, I must add, could one fail to recognize how much more needs to be done. The present *Volunteer Challenge* assesses the progress, and lack of it, over the past decade, and goes into detail on some of the events that I will summarize briefly, and which I believe have special significance.

Here, then, are a few recent milestones in archives and records preservation at the state level since 1993:

1. **State legislation mandating county public records commissions.** Until 1994 legislation at the state level permitted the establishment of county records commissions in every county. In that year the law was amended to read: “In order to provide for the orderly disposition of public records created by agencies of county government, the county legislation body *shall create* [italics added] within the county a county records commission, composed of six (6) members.” (TCA §10-7-401)

2. **Increased cooperation between public libraries and archives.** Perhaps “cooperation” should read “communication” because concrete projects between libraries and archives continue to be rare events in Tennessee. But in at least two counties, Benton and Hardin, new libraries have been built with substantial space for county archives. In one other county, Greene, the public library has established an archive to be housed separately with its historical and genealogical collection. Still others are giving serious consideration to joint projects—without, I might add, actually merging services.

3. **The Archives Summit, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, September 24-25, 1998.** Chaired by Secretary of State Riley C. Darnell and Walter T. Durham (now Tennessee State Historian), and dedicated to John Thweatt, this two-day meeting of archivists, records managers, and public officials from across the state laid the groundwork for increased funding for archival programs at the state level (\$152,000) and for increased consciousness of the importance of archives and public records in the body politic.

4. **Establishment of Assistant State Archivist position and Local Archives Program in the Tennessee State Library and Archives.** The funding mentioned immediately above, made available through the strong support of Senator Douglas Henry, Secretary Darnell, and Mr. Durham, was used to appoint the state’s first Assistant State Archivist, in the person of William W. Moss. Mr. Moss joined the staff of the Tennessee State Library and Archives in November of 1998, after having served in leadership positions with the John F. Kennedy Library and the Smithsonian Institution. He was also appointed chair of the Tennessee Historical Records Advisory Board. Wayne Moore was appointed Deputy Assistant State Archivist for the two years of Mr. Moss’s tenure, and then succeeded him as Assistant State Archivist. With Jami Awalt’s assistance, this team of three made up our first Local Archives Program, which provides support to local archives in the form of consultative services, in-service education, and grants.

5. **Additional support for Tennessee Historical Records Advisory Board and grants to local archives.** The new funding was also used to provide additional state support to the Tennessee Historical Advisory Board, of which Dr. Moore was appointed chair. Then \$50,000 in state funds was designated for preservation grants to local archives, a program that is still in effect.

6. **Tennessee Archives Institute.** This full report will chronicle a number of ongoing activities of the current staff, but I would like to emphasize the importance of another ongoing program, the Archives Institute, modeled on the Public Library Management Institute. In both cases, part-time in-service education is provided to practicing librarians and archivists who have not had the opportunity to pursue a professional degree in their respective fields. In both cases, too, the three-year programs have been well attended, well received, and, I believe, highly efficacious.

There is more, much more, to tell about the development of archives and records programs in Tennessee, much of which appears in the report that follows. And there are people as well, many people, from across the state who have worked quietly but effectively to raise awareness of the importance of history and of the need to preserve the primary materials that document that history. We pay homage to those extraordinary citizens around this state who have created local support and built archives from nothing. It is they who are responding so effectively to “the volunteer challenge.”